

07/16/21 Friday

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Israel, Morocco Sign Cybersecurity Deal in First Since Normalizing Relations
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Israel has one of the world's most advanced cybersecurity programs, having helped the US to develop the Stuxnet computer virus that wrecked almost one-fifth of Iran's nuclear centrifuges in 2009 and 2010.

Israel's National Cyber Directorate unveiled on Thursday a new cybersecurity cooperation agreement with Morocco, the first major security deal between the two states since they normalized relations last December.

"The accord is for operational cooperation, research and development and the sharing of information and knowledge," the Israeli Foreign Ministry said on Thursday, according to [the Jerusalem Post](#). The deal was inaugurated in Rabat by Israel National Cyber Directorate Yigal Unna, his Moroccan counterpart, General El Mostafa Rabii, and the Minister Delegate in charge of National Defense Administration, Abdellatif Loudiyi.

Unna's visit comes [a week after](#) Israeli Foreign Ministry Director-General Alon Ushpiz met with Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita in Rabat and invited him on a first-ever visit to Israel. "Israel views Morocco as an important friend and partner in the efforts to advance peace and security in the region," Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett [said on Twitter](#) last month, in response to a congratulatory message on his prime ministership sent by Moroccan King Mohammed VI.

"I will further Israeli-Moroccan relations in all spheres for the welfare and prosperity of both peoples, who have been friends for many years," Bennett added.

The Israeli Cyber Directorate said the deal includes cooperation on research, development, and information-sharing.

Morocco established formal diplomatic relations with Israel for the first time in December 2020, becoming the most recent of four Arab states to sign similar "Abraham Accord" agreements with Israel last year, with the others being Sudan, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. In exchange for the move, which [provoked condemnation](#) across the Muslim world, the United States recognized Morocco's claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara, a non-self-governing territory to the south that is home to the indigenous Saharawi people.

However, as [Sputnik has reported](#), Morocco's relationship with Israel is decades long, with most of it occurring in secret. That includes intelligence-sharing, such as the secret meeting in 1965 in Casablanca at which the government King Hassan II passed Israel's Shin Bet and Mossad recordings of the Arab leaders planning a large-scale attack on Israel. Meir Amit, who was head of Mossad at the time, [described the meeting](#) in a memo to then-Prime Minister Levi Eshkol as "one of the crowning glories of Israeli intelligence."

The intelligence helped Israel plan the 1967 Six-Day War, a sneak attack that routed the armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria and allowed Israel to seize huge swaths of territory, including the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, and the entire Sinai Peninsula. Other Abraham Accord nations are also deepening their relationships with Israel, too: earlier this week, the UAE inaugurated [its new embassy](#) in Tel Aviv, following the opening of Israel's embassy in Abu Dhabi.

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Pope Francis Abrogates Rule Allowing Latin Mass by Breakaway Sect, Says Rule Backfired by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Pope Francis has often been seen as out-of-step with some of the Catholic Church's rank-and-file members, such as when US bishops voted to allow refusing the Eucharist to abortion-permitting politicians after he urged it not to be used as a "political weapon." In a rare move on Friday, Pope Francis issued new legislation reversing a policy set by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, which had allowed a schismatic sect of Catholics to continue to hold mass in the traditional Latin instead of in vernacular languages, as the Catholic Church decided to do in the 1960s.

[Sweeping legislation](#) on Friday erased Summorum Pontificum, the 2007 law by Benedict that permitted dissident Catholic groups to continue to hold Latin Mass, also called the Tridentine Mass, and charged bishops with the sole power to "regulate the liturgical celebrations of his diocese."

According to the [Associated Press](#), the fear is that the Society of St. Pius X, who worships in Latin, has not accepted the Second Vatican Council, an ecumenical summit from 1962 to 1965 at which the Catholic Church updated its practices for the modern world. One of the most impactful was that Mass was to be held using local languages and not Latin, the language of the ancient Roman Empire which is no longer spoken in everyday life.

If they want to hold Latin Mass, then they have to do it in alternate locations without creating new parishes.

Alongside the legislation, [Francis sent a letter](#) to Catholic bishops explaining his reasoning behind the move, which is highly unusual. He argued that Benedict had "intended to recover the unity" of the Church by tolerating dissident practices, instead the measure "was exploited to widen the gaps, reinforce the divergences, and encourage disagreements that injure the Church, block her path, and expose her to the peril of division."

The 84-year-old Argentinian pontiff said he had made the decision after surveying every single Catholic bishop in the world, the results of which, he said, "reveal a situation that preoccupies and saddens me, and persuades me of the need to intervene."

Author Michael Sean Winters, writing in [National Catholic Reporter](#), characterized it as "the ecclesial equivalent of ripping off the Band-aid in one pull," adding that "it was also the only real option."

"A priest who was close to Benedict told me that when the pope issued Summorum Pontificum, he 'never intended to start a movement, still less an ideology!' But that is what happened," Winters recalled.

However, others strongly disapproved of Francis' move.

Joseph Shaw, chairman of the Latin Mass Society of England and Wales, told AP that it was "an extraordinary rejection of the hard work for the church and the loyalty to the hierarchy which has characterized the movement for the Traditional Mass for many years, which I fear will foster a sense of alienation among those attached to the church's ancient liturgy."

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'Pandemic of the Unvaccinated': CDC Chief Says 97% of US Hospitalizations Didn't Get COVID-19 Shots

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As COVID-19 cases begin to increase again in the US for the first time in months, the head of the country's public health agency has warned that essentially all of the serious cases are being found among people who haven't been vaccinated against the illness.

"There is a clear message that is coming through," US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Thursday during a press briefing at the White House.

"This is becoming a pandemic of the unvaccinated. We are seeing outbreaks of cases in parts of the country that have low vaccination coverage because unvaccinated people are at risk," she said.

Across the US, the [seven-day average](#) of new daily cases was 26,300 on Wednesday, which notably trailed the daily new case numbers for the last several days, signaling a sharp uptick in cases. However, that spread is highly uneven, with 40% of new cases being found in just four states, and Florida accounting for 20% by itself, White House COVID-19 response coordinator Jeff Zients said at the presser.

Moreover, more than half the new cases are caused by the delta variant of SARS CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, which is easier to transmit to other people than earlier forms of the virus and has the ability to infect even fully vaccinated people, although they experience a much milder form of the illness.

Other states shouldering a large part of the outbreak include Arkansas, Missouri, and Nevada, although nearly every state showed some increase in cases over the last week, according to CDC data. Those states are also among those lagging behind the rest of the US in vaccination rates: [Florida ranks](#) in at 26th most vaccinated state, while Nevada is 35th, Missouri is 39th, and Arkansas is 49th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia. By comparison, new cases, and especially cases requiring hospitalization, remain low in areas of the country with higher vaccination rates, such as the Northeast and Northwest.

"The good news is if you are fully vaccinated you are protected against severe COVID, hospitalization and death, and are even protected against the known variants, including the

delta variant, circulating in this country," Walensky added. "If you are not vaccinated, you remain at risk."

In [Maryland last week](#), a spokesperson for Governor Bill Hogan noted that of the nearly 100 Marylanders who had died of COVID-19 in the previous month, every one of them was unvaccinated. In addition, 95% of newly infected people in the state and 93% of those requiring hospitalization were unvaccinated.

The pace of vaccination in the US has declined sharply in recent months, from a peak reached in mid-April of 4.6 million shots administered per day to just 567,000 on July 15. At present, 56% of the US population has been vaccinated, but according to a projection by the [New York Times](#), at the present rate of vaccination, the US won't hit 70% vaccination until January of next year, and won't hit 85% vaccination until next July.

In some states, the vaccination campaign has become a pawn in the political battlefield, with the conservative Republican governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, casting disdain for vaccinations and protective face masks as synonymous with "freedom."

Last month, [DeSantis boasted](#) of a huge budget surplus, saying that it "would not have been possible if we had followed" Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) at the National Institutes for Health (NIH). "Instead, we followed freedom and that's the reason why Florida's doing better."

More recently, his website has [begun selling items](#) bearing slogans such as "Don't Fauci My Florida" and "How the hell am I going to be able to drink a beer with a mask on?"

The White House has also blamed social media sites [such as Facebook](#) for allowing disinformation about vaccines to spread. An anti-vaccine movement had been rising in the US for years even before the COVID-19 pandemic, focused primarily on the false notion that vaccines are responsible for children developing autism, but a slew of claims about both COVID-19 vaccines and the vaccination campaign have been made encouraging people not to get the protective shot.

"Obviously there are steps they have taken," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Friday about disinformation on Facebook. "They're a private sector company. There are additional steps they can take. It's clear that there are more that can be taken."

"If you have low vaccination and high case rates then I would say local policymakers might consider whether masking at that point would be something that would be helpful for their community until they scale up their vaccination rates," Walensky said on Friday.

In Texas, the state capital of Austin has reimposed a mask policy in response to rising COVID-19 cases, but is barred from making it mandatory thanks to an executive order by Texas Governor Greg Abbott [banning pandemic mandates](#). As in Florida, Abbott cast government-directed public health requirements as infringements of Texans' freedom, even [threatening to sue](#) the Austin city government if it continued to require mask-wearing.

The state saw just under 40,000 shots delivered on Wednesday, one of the lowest days since the February winter storm that brought vaccinations to a halt in most of the state. About 42% of the state's 29 million people are vaccinated, and cases are on the rise, according to data collected by the Texas Tribune.

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US Federal Judge Blocks DACA Applications, Rules Program 'Illegal'
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A very low immigration quota set by the Trump administration created a huge backlog in the processing of applications, including those by tens of thousands of Afghans who collaborated with the US occupation of Afghanistan and whose paperwork the Biden administration is now rushing to process as it prepares to withdraw from the country.

A US federal judge in Texas has ruled the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program "illegal" and ordered the government to stop processing applications to the program. Judge Andrew S. Hanen of the United States District Court for the Southern District of Texas [ruled on Friday](#) that the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) "is directed to post a public notice, within 3 calendar days of this injunction, to be displayed prominently on its website and on the websites of all other relevant agencies, that a United States District Court has found the DACA program to be illegal and that, though applicants may continue to submit applications, the government is prohibited from granting such applications."

"The court finds this permanent injunction is reasonable and properly takes into account the reliance interests of the Plaintiff States on the duly enacted immigration laws of this country, the interests of the public in having the government and its agencies and employees comply with the law, and the significant reliance interests that DACA has engendered since its inception," the ruling continues. "If the government fails to take the appropriate steps to remedy the shortfalls in DACA within a reasonable time given the complexities inherent in such a process, the court will reconsider its decision to stay portions of the relief that it has granted, if an appropriate motion is filed."

According to Hanen, DHS violated the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) by creating and continuing to operate DACA because judicial precedent has established that a US government agency has no power to act until given that power by Congress, and Congress has "expressly foreclosed DHS's adoption of the DACA memorandum."

The DACA program was begun in 2012 after the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act failed to pass Congress, in order to give immigrants who were illegally brought to the country as children the chance to gain lawful status. It has been highly contentious for virtually its entire existence, producing extensive legal battles as opponents of the act attempted to block its implementation or phase it out completely, as former US President Donald Trump attempted to do, or to retain or reinstate it as a program, as US President Joe Biden did on his first day in office on January 20, 2021.

In 2018, Judge Hanen similarly ruled that DACA was probably illegal, but he declined to issue an injunction at that time due to ongoing litigation. "If the nation truly wants a DACA program," [Hanen wrote](#) at the time, "it is up to Congress to say so."

Last week, the Biden administration announced it was assigning more immigration officers to help US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) process an enormous backlog of applications, including both first-time applicants and renewal applications. [According to CBS](#), as

of May 31, USCIS had adjudicated just 1,900 of more than 62,000 first-time applications to DACA, and by the end of June it had reached 81,000 applications, with some 13,000 being more than 120 days old.

In March, the US House of Representatives passed the American Dream and Promise Act of 2021, which would pave a path to citizenship for DACA recipients. While the bill has faced a much tougher challenge in the Senate, Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV), a moderate Democrat who is often out of step with his party's mainstream political goals, signaled [earlier this week](#) that he supported including the act in the colossal \$3.5 trillion infrastructure deal being shoved through the Senate via the budget reconciliation process.

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President Ramaphosa: Unrest in South Africa 'Sought to Provoke Popular Insurrection'
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said on Friday in a television address that a state of emergency in response to days of rioting was not needed because the violence was declining and calm was returning.

"It is clear now that the events of the past week were nothing less than a deliberate, coordinated and well-planned attack on our democracy. The constitutional order of our country is under threat," Ramaphosa said on Friday evening. "These actions are intended to cripple the economy, cause social instability and severely weaken – or even dislodge – the democratic state. Using the pretext of a political grievance, those behind these acts have sought to provoke a popular insurrection."

However, he cautioned that despite fears the riots would cause shortages of essential supplies, security forces were working with businesses to ensure the safe transportation of fuel, food, oxygen and medicine, so there was no need for citizens to panic buy.

"They have sought to exploit the social and economic conditions under which many South Africans live – conditions that have worsened since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic – and to provoke ordinary citizens and criminal networks to engage in opportunistic acts of looting. The ensuing chaos is used as a smokescreen to carry out economic sabotage through targeted attacks on trucks, factories, warehouses and other infrastructure necessary for the functioning of our economy and the provision of services," Ramaphosa said.

"We will extinguish the fires that are raging, and stamp out every last ember. We will identify and act against those who lit the flame, and those who spread it," he said. "We will find those who instigated this violence. They will be held accountable for their deeds. We will not allow anyone to destabilise our country and get away with it."

However, he noted that 10,000 South African National Defense Force troops had been deployed "to supplement the work of police, with another 15,000 who had been activated and would be deployed over the weekend.

Ramaphosa, who came to power in 2018 amid a vote of no confidence that ousted then-President Jacob Zuma, said his government would undertake a critical review of its preparedness and response to such incidents, noting they had been poorly prepared. More than 2,550 people have been arrested in connection with acts of violence as well as looting, and at least 212 people have been killed, he said: 180 in KwaZulu-Natal Province and 32 in Gauteng Province.

He also noted that 161 malls and shopping centers, 11 warehouses, 8 factories and 161 liquor stores and distributors had been "extensively" damaged, and that the chaos would cause further job losses. Although sparked by [Zuma's arrest](#) last week for contempt of court, the demonstrations that began on July 9 were fanned by [catastrophically high unemployment](#) and COVID-19 shutdowns that included temporary bans on the sale of liquor, which helped to bring huge numbers of people into the streets.

Ramaphosa said the government is working on a comprehensive support package to extend relief to those affected by the calamity.

"We are in the process of providing immediate food relief to households. We are targeting areas affected by the looting and where people have no access to food," Ramaphosa said, adding that "Provincial departments of Social Development and SASSA [South African Social Security Administration] will use their remaining budget to provide support in the form of food parcels, cash and food vouchers."

"To assist with the immediate needs of affected communities, the Solidarity Fund has established a Humanitarian Crisis Relief Fund to assist those in greatest need. We are calling on all South Africans to support this fund," he added. "Social partners have been meeting to discuss a range of measures which can be implemented to provide immediate relief within our fiscal means. This includes emergency food relief and other assistance to those in greatest distress."

He also said that the urgently needed vaccination campaign would be restarted as soon as possible.

The president cautioned that "while calm has returned to most of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, the threat to our country and to our democracy remains present and real. Those responsible for organising this campaign of violence and destruction have not yet been apprehended and their networks have not yet been dismantled. We must therefore remain vigilant."

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White House Slams Facebook for 'Inadequate' Steps to Stem Vaccine Misinformation
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media platforms have been riddled with misinformation and disinformation campaigns regarding the SARS-CoV-2 virus and vaccines that have been cleared for public use by the US government. However, despite efforts to curb said posts, tech giants have struggled to completely remove false claims.

The White House has yet again slammed efforts taken on by social media giant Facebook to clamp down on misinformation posts, noting that the platform simply is not doing enough to do away with false claims about COVID-19 or related vaccines.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters during a Friday briefing that the Silicon Valley company needed to enforce more action to rid the social media platform of misinformation.

"Obviously there are steps they have taken. They're a private sector company. There are additional steps they can take," Psaki remarked. "It's clear that there are more that can be taken."

"You shouldn't be banned from one platform and not others if you've provided misinformation," she underscored.

Psaki's Friday commentary largely echoed stern remarks the press secretary made during the [Thursday briefing](#), when she stated that Facebook needs to "move more quickly to remove harmful violative" posts about COVID-19 and the US' ongoing vaccine push.

At the time, Psaki detailed to reporters that the White House is currently working to flag "problematic posts" found on Facebook, many of which are being produced by "12 people" disseminating "65% of anti-vaccine misinformation on social media platforms."

"All of them remain active on Facebook, despite some even being banned on other platforms, including Facebook - ones that Facebook owns," she said during the Thursday briefing. The Mark Zuckerberg-headed platform also owns the popular photo-sharing app Instagram and messaging platform WhatsApp.

However, Psaki is not the only Biden administration official sounding off on Facebook's lacking efforts. In fact, US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy addressed reporters on Thursday and issued an "urgent threat" advisory against health misinformation, saying that, simply put, "Americans lives are at risk" and misinformation efforts are making it much more difficult to combat the pandemic.

Facebook has been revving up its attempts to stamp out misinformation and disinformation campaigns for some years now, with efforts kicking into high gear with the recent election cycles and the onset of the pandemic. Following Psaki's Thursday critiques, Facebook released a statement indicating that they have removed "more than 18 million pieces of COVID misinformation," including accounts that repeatedly broke rules.

The company [previously indicated](#) that its measures to halt misinformation included the use of machine learning to sift out posts detailing false news and tapping the use of third-party fact-checkers to review content. More recently, Facebook launched a "Together Against COVID-19 Misinformation" [initiative](#) to reduce false vaccine claims, and hike up posts with accurate information.

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Video: White House's Psaki Clashes With Fox News Reporter Over 'Loaded And Inaccurate Question'

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, the White House sounded off the alarm for critics after declaring that administration officials were actively working to flag “problematic posts” emerging on Facebook about COVID-19 and the US’ vaccine campaign. The declaration came as authorities have urged more needs to be done to shutter misinformation initiatives across social media.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki has gone to bat once again against Fox News’ Peter Doocy, adding onto a growing list of squabbles between the pair since the start of the Biden administration.

The latest showdown between the press secretary and the reporter unfolded during Friday’s [press briefing](#), just as the subject turned to COVID-19 and the continued rise of misinformation regarding the pandemic on social media, especially on Facebook.

Recalling Psaki’s Thursday acknowledgement that the White House was actively working to flag offending posts, Doocy came in with a right hook, asking the press secretary “for how long has the administration been spying on people’s Facebook profiles looking for vaccine misinformation?”

Appearing somewhat taken aback, Psaki went in with guns at-the-ready and instantly remarked that Doocy’s inquiry “was quite a loaded and inaccurate question which I would refute.”

Speaking over Doocy’s repeated attempts to interrupt, Psaki shut down Doocy’s claims by reiterating that posts being reviewed are publicly available, and as such would not suggest any “spying” efforts to be undertaken.

“This is publicly open information - people sharing information online just as you are all reporting information on your news stations,” she remarked before addressing the reporter’s inquiry about the “12 people” on Facebook that are disseminating false COVID-19 claims.

“There’s no secret list. I will tell you that these are people who are sharing information on public platforms on Facebook. Information that is traveling is inaccurate.”

“Our biggest concern here, and I frankly think it should be your biggest concern, is the number of people who are dying around the country because they’re getting misinformation that is leading them to not take a vaccine,” she added.

Psaki had previously stated during the Thursday briefing that at least a dozen individuals were responsible for sharing about 65% of all the anti-vaccine misinformation on social media platforms

However, when Doocy retaliated by stating that members of the public are growing increasingly concerned with the “Big Brother watching you” mentality, Psaki questioned the validity of the statement and called for him to produce data that supported the claims instead.

And yet, that still was not the end of the Friday back-and-forth for the pair, as Doocy still had one more inquiry left in his lineup. Enter Dr. Anthony Fauci, the prominent figure who serves as a medical advisor to the president and heads the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

Doocy took his last stab at the briefing by asking whether the Biden administration would be calling on Facebook to remove content of Fauci saying that masks were not necessary at the beginning of the pandemic. The press secretary promptly called it a day on Doocy’s question time by simply emphasizing that science and information evolves.

The latest row between the two did not go unnoticed, with netizens eagerly taking in the somewhat tense exchange.

With Psaki [expected to leave](#) the press secretary role in 2022, it's anyone's guess on who may take the last laugh.

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'This Has to Stop': Ivanka Reportedly Spent 'Several Hours' Urging Trump to Dissuade Capitol Rioters
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Despite widespread coverage of the destruction dealt to the US Capitol in early January, it took former US President Donald Trump over three hours to issue a message calling for rioters to "remain peaceful." An hour later, he sent out a mixed message that reiterated voter fraud claims and encouraged his supporters to "go home."

As thousands of Trump supporters broke past security barriers and ransacked the US Capitol, Ivanka Trump repeatedly called on her father, then President Donald Trump, to dissuade rioters, a newly released tell-all book about the Trump White House has revealed.

Titled "I Alone Can Fix It: Donald J. Trump's Catastrophic Final Year," the book was written by Washington Post reporters Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig. It hit bookshelves on Thursday and has since offered new details on, well, the final days of the Trump administration.

One of the new revelations includes exchanges between Trump and his eldest daughter Ivanka as the events of January 6 unfolded right before their very eyes, the first of which began with the president telling his second-in-command that he did not have "courage" to halt the certification of the election results.

"Ivanka Trump, standing next to [former national security adviser Keith] Kellogg near a grandfather clock in the back of the room, had a hard time listening to her father badger the vice president to do something she knew was not possible," an [excerpt](#) released by the Washington Post reads. "'Mike Pence is a good man,' she said quietly."

As the day went on and her father took the stage at the "Stop the Steal" rally on the White House lawn, Ivanka, who at the time served as her father's senior advisor and confidant, reportedly remained uneasy about the entire situation. By the time rioters broke into the federal building, she kicked it into high gear and began a persuasion campaign urging her father to call off the rioters.

"As soon as she saw on the television in her second-floor office that the rioters were inside the Capitol, Ivanka Trump said to her aides, 'I'm going down to my dad. This has to stop,'" the book notes. "She spent several hours walking back and forth to the Oval [Office] trying to persuade the president to be stronger in telling his supporters he stood with law enforcement and ordering them to disperse."

"Just when Ivanka Trump thought she had made headway and returned upstairs, [former White House Chief of Staff Mark] Meadows would call her to say that the president still needed more persuading," Rucker and Leonnig detail. This back and forth between the Trumps is said to have "repeated itself several times."

"As another presidential adviser said, 'Ivanka was described to me like a stable pony. When the racehorse gets too agitated, you bring the stable pony in to calm him down,'" the excerpt read, also indicating that Meadows at-times ordered the room cleared so that Ivanka could get through her father.

At one point in the day, even US Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) reportedly called in for Ivanka to step in and convince the president "to tell these people to leave."

Trump's daughter did also attempt to quell the rioters through her own Twitter account, urging the "American Patriots" to pull back and remain "peaceful." However, that message was deleted not long after it went live.

In the end, the former president did not urge his supporters to cease the violence until after 3 p.m. local time, more than an hour after reports first trickled in that individuals had broken past security barriers at the US Capitol. But as the newly-released book notes, many members of his inner circle were not a fan of the single tweet and wanted more action from the president.

And then came then-President-elect Joe Biden's address from Delaware. Shortly afterwards, Trump tweeted out a video address that had a reworked mix of voter fraud claims and calls for the "special" supporters to "go home in peace."

It was not until roughly 8 p.m. local time that authorities were able to have enough control of the situation to have lawmakers resume their election certification procedures. In the weeks that followed, a second impeachment process against Trump was launched on the basis of inciting an insurrection. However, the effort ultimately died in the US Senate.

To date, Trump has continued to voice unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud, allegations of which even prompted a recount in [Arizona](#). Talks of similar efforts have also been taken up in other US states, including in [Pennsylvania](#).

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Facebook Slams Biden Over 'Killing People' Remark, Says Platform is 'Saving Lives'
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, the White House reiterated its stance against Facebook's lacking efforts to seriously combat COVID-19 misinformation on its platform, urging the company to once again double its efforts. However, the relation between the two entities became somewhat more heated after harsh words about the company were thrown out by US President Joe Biden.

Taking a stance against the Biden administration and more specifically US President Joe Biden, Facebook blasted earlier remarks made by the commander-in-chief and underscored that the platform was "helping save lives" through its efforts to take down COVID-19 misinformation.

The late [Friday statement](#), which is none too positive about the Biden White House, was authored by Dani Lever, who serves as the communications manager for the social media platform.

"We will not be distracted by accusations which aren't supported by the facts," Lever wrote. "The fact is that more than 2 billion people have viewed authoritative information about COVID-19 and vaccines on Facebook, which is more than any other place on the internet."

"More than 3.3 million Americans have also used our vaccine finder tool to find out where and how to get a vaccine. The facts show that Facebook is helping save lives. Period."

The stern rebuke of the administration came moments after Biden was asked by NBC reporter Peter Alexander what his "message" to Facebook and other social media companies about the spread of COVID-19 misinformation was.

At the time, Biden stated plainly that Facebook and company were "killing people," going on to say that "the only pandemic we have is among the unvaccinated, and that's - they're killing people."

The latest exchange between the administration and Facebook came just a day after White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki stated that the popular platform needed to do much more to combat the emergence of misinformation, including the removal of 12 users who are to blame for 65% of the false claims being made about the respiratory disease and associated vaccines. Although Facebook later noted that it has removed upwards of "18 million pieces of COVID misinformation," Psaki said it simply was not enough when asked about the remarks during her [Friday briefing](#) with reporters.

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EIA: Coal Production in Wyoming Down 21% as US Sees Lowest Yield Since 1965
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) forecasts that coal production in the states will increase by 78 million short tons (MMst), or 15%, for 2021, reflecting the greater demand for coal in the electric power sector. However, the administration does not foresee the US' overall coal production capacity returning to pre-pandemic levels.

US coal exports plummeted to a modern-day low of 535 MMst in 2020, amounting to a 24% decrease from the country's 2019 coal output of 706 MMst, according to the EIA's [annual coal export report](#).

The EIA attributed the staggering dip in US coal production to an international decrease in demand for coal, as well as less demand by the US' own power sector in 2020.

Additionally, COVID-19-related lockdowns and local mitigation measures slowed down normal coal mining operations. Oklahoma and Tennessee both halted coal production efforts after the first quarter of 2020.

"Lower natural gas prices made coal less competitive for power generation," the EIA release detailed, noting that coal-fired electricity generation in the US [has been on a constant decline](#) as appliances and other units have been either retired or converted to rely on a different energy source.

The pandemic-era total comes as the lowest level of coal production in the US since 1965. Wyoming, the US' top coal-mining state, produced 21% less coal in 2020 than the year prior, but still represented 41% of US coal production for 2020. West Virginia and Pennsylvania, the next-leading states in coal production, observed a 27.9% and 27.4% decrease in coal output, respectively.

Despite the grim federal report, coal accounts for around 20% to 23% of the US electricity supply, "and it's going to be like that for a while," according to Travis Deti, executive director of the Wyoming Mining Association.

Deti [told the Casper Star-Tribune](#) that the [yearslong decrease in coal production](#) reflects the "fact that utilities are scaling back their coal use," and should not be cause for panic.

"We're not going to turn off the lights and shut down the mines here tomorrow," he said. "We're going to be around for a long time."

The Wyoming Mining Association official noted that some 572 energy-related jobs have returned to the western US state in 2021, and statewide production of the resource is already up 8% from last year. He emphasized that extreme temperatures in the US have led to increased market demand, as more coal is burned amid such events.

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US Seeks to Flex Regional Readiness in Pacific Deployment of Dozens of F-22 Raptors
by [Evan Craighead](#)

US Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) announced this week that more than 35 aircraft and over 800 Indo-Pacific Command airmen will take part in Operation Pacific Iron 2021 this month. The mission comes in support of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, which seeks in part to counter China's "predatory economics" and militarization of the South China Sea.

PACAF Commander Gen. Ken Wilsbach teased on Thursday that the upcoming operation in Guam and the Tinian islands will come as a historic first for fifth-generation fighter jets with the US Indo-Pacific Command's air service.

"We have never had this many [F-22] Raptors deployed together in the Pacific Air Forces area of operations," [he revealed to CNN](#).

Later this month, at least 25 F-22s assigned to the Hawaii Air National Guard are set to travel from Alaska's Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, to the islands of Guam and Tinian, according to a [PACAF announcement issued this week](#).

While China has 20 to 24 operational fifth-generation fighter jets, the US has some 180 deployable F-22s, CNN reported, citing Carl Schuster, a Hawaii-based defense analyst and a former director of operations at the Joint Intelligence Center of the US Pacific Command (USPACOM).

"The Pacific Air Force is demonstrating that it can deploy as many or more fifth-generation aircraft into the theater on short notice than [China] currently has in its entire inventory," he said. Traditionally, six to 12 F-22s make up a deployment, Schuster added.

Retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Dan "Fig" Leaf, a former deputy commander of USPACOM, told the Honolulu Star-Advertiser earlier this week that the historic deployment of more than two dozen F-22 fighter jets appears to be a demonstration of Washington's readiness to the region. He urged China to heed the US military's "message" in Pacific Iron 2021, which comes in support of [the US' 2018 National Defense Strategy](#).

"I'd take it as a demonstration of the legitimacy of the American commitment to the region, because messaging is one thing when it's just words," he said. "But this is not just a statement, it's an investment in capability because it's not cheap to deploy 25 F-22s from two different bases to the Western Pacific."

Per the PACAF, airmen taking part in the mission will conduct Agile Combat Employment (ACE) operations designed to ensure mission readiness and train airmen to operate with increased capabilities, particularly in less-than-optimal environments.

Airmen participating in the readiness exercises will operate from the Tinian International Airport and three airports on Guam, including Andersen AFB. The service believes the exercises will enhance survivability, as well as its ability to operate from a variety of smaller airfields around the Indo-Pacific region.

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Arizona Officials Reportedly Find Only 182 Cases of Potential Voter Fraud Out of 3.4 Million Ballots

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this year, Republicans in the Arizona state senate launched a "forensic review" of Maricopa County's 2020 election results. On Thursday, Republican lawmakers told their colleagues that the review is taking longer than originally estimated due to damaged ballots and a lack of access to necessary data.

As the [partisan audit of the 2020 US election in Arizona](#) persists, county election officials from the Grand Canyon State have identified at least 182 potential cases of voter fraud, according to a new [investigation by the Associated Press](#).

Of the 182 cases referred to investigators for further review, only four instances have led to charges. As of this article's publication, zero individuals have been convicted of voter fraud during Arizona's 2020 election.

No submitted ballots were counted twice, and election officials in 11 of the 15 counties in Arizona reported zero potential cases of voter fraud.

Maricopa County, which is home to the state capital of Phoenix, found one potential case of voter fraud out of a total of 2.1 million ballots submitted.

Overall, more than 3.4 million ballots were cast in the state's election. Ultimately, then-Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden was awarded 11 electoral college votes from the state, as he accrued more than 10,000 votes over then-Republican presidential nominee and US President Donald Trump.

"The fact of the matter is that election officials across the state are highly invested in helping to ensure the integrity of our elections and the public's confidence in them," Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs, a Democrat, told the AP. "And part of that entails taking potential voter fraud seriously."

The bulk of the cases referred to investigators came from Pima County, which has stricter criteria for potential fraud reports. The majority of Pima County's cases reportedly involved Arizona voters attempting to vote twice.

The AP investigation into the matter comes alongside the GOP-controlled Arizona state senate's "forensic audit" of the 2020 election results in Maricopa County.

A number of Republicans, including Trump, have alleged that an audit will back their allegations of widespread voter fraud, but results remain pending.

Local Democrats have pushed back against the audit, questioning the security and validity of the audit by Cyber Ninjas, a private firm that lacks any experience with election reviews. More recently, the US House Oversight [Committee echoed these concerns](#) via a July 14 memo issued to Cyber Ninjas CEO Doug Logan.

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US Charges 4 Chinese Nationals With Global Cyber Conspiracy – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) – The US Justice Department on Monday announced charges against four Chinese nationals who it said worked with China's government to conduct a computer intrusion campaign targeting dozens of companies, universities and government entities in the United States and other countries.

"The indictment alleges that much of the conspiracy's theft was focused on information that was of significant economic benefit to China's companies and commercial sectors, including information that would allow the circumvention of lengthy and resource-intensive research and development processes," the Justice Department said in a press release.

The Justice Department announced the indictment, which was filed in May and newly unsealed Friday, on Monday as the United States and other countries accused China's government of a global hacking campaign.

The indictment alleges that the four accused - Ding Xiaoyang, Cheng Qingmin, Zhu Yunmin and Wu Shurong - worked with the Hainan State Security Department (HSSD) to target "dozens of victim companies, universities and government entities in the United States and abroad between 2011 and 2018," according to the release.

The scheme targeted victims located in the US, Austria, Cambodia, Canada, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, Norway, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Switzerland and the UK, the release said. The attacks were aimed at aviation, defense, education, government, health care, biopharmaceutical and maritime sectors among others, it added.

Each defendant is charged with one count of conspiracy to commit computer fraud and one count of conspiracy to commit economic espionage, and faces up to 20 years in prison, according to the release.

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US Airports' Daily Passenger Volumes Cross 2Mln Mark, First Time Since COVID - TSA

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - Passenger check-ins at US airports crossed the 2 million daily mark over the weekend, the first time since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic last year, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) said Monday.

"TSA screened 2,227,704 individuals at airport security checkpoints yesterday, Sunday, July 18," TSA spokesperson Lisa Farbstein said in a tweet. "It is the first time that checkpoint volume surpassed 2.2 million since the start of the pandemic."

TSA records show that it screened some 324 million travelers at US airport security checkpoints in 2020, down from 824 million in 2019.

Airline passenger volumes began plummeting in March as public health officials urged Americans to avoid all nonessential travel. Check-ins hit a low of 87,534 on April 14, roughly 4 percent of the total reported on the same day in 2019.

Farbstein, in her tweet, also reminded passengers to "mask-up" as the requirement for face-coverings appeared to be making a comeback at public facilities due to the emergence of more deadly COVID variants such as the Delta. Most US states loosened up on masking over the past two months due to the rapid pace of vaccinations against the virus.

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PREVIEW - Jordan's King Abdullah II to Become 1st Arab Leader to Visit White House Under Biden

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Monday will host King Abdullah II of Jordan, the first Arab leader to visit the White House under the current administration as the latter tries to reaffirm traditional commitments to the region after their predecessors' revisionism. "It will be an opportunity to discuss the many challenges facing the Middle East and showcase Jordan's leadership role in promoting peace and stability in the region," the White House previewed the summit.

In April, Biden threw his support behind King Abdullah II when the monarch faced an alleged coup attempt by his half-brother, Prince Hamzah. A rare rift within the royal family was swiftly quashed with the rebellious Prince silenced and his purported co-conspirators facing trial. The United States sees Jordan as instrumental in handling the Israeli-Palestinian and Syrian crises.

"His Majesty's visit will highlight the enduring and strategic partnership between the United States and Jordan, a key security partner and ally of the United States," the White House said in a statement.

Abdullah II has been on a visit to the United States since July 1. According to the Royal Palace, he met with US Central Command head Kenneth McKenzie and US Special Operations Command head Richard Clarke. The king also participated in the Sun Valley economic forum in the US state of Idaho.

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Romanovs Commemoration Served By Bishop Basil in USSR Led to Their Canonization-Assistant

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - One of the first unofficial commemorations of Russian Emperor Nicholas II and his family, which was served by bishop Basil Rodzianko in the Soviet Union in 1988 during the 70th anniversary of their assassination, paved the way for their Romanovs canonization by the Russian church, the bishop's longtime personal assistant Marilyn Swezey told Sputnik.

"The commemoration that bishop Basil served unofficially that day was the beginning of a decade of gradual recognition of the royal martyrs leading to their canonization in 2000 with the new martyrs of Russia in the 20th Century," Swezey said. "Providentially, that service coincided with the political changes in Russia just a few years later, leading to the glorification of the holy royal martyrs."

Nicholas II and his family were assassinated by the Bolsheviks on July 17, 1918 in Yekaterinburg. The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) canonized them as new martyrs in 1981, while their glorification by the Moscow Patriarchate as passion bearers followed 19 years later.

Bishop Basil was grandson of the Russian State Duma president during the reign of Nicholas II, Mikhail Rodzianko. The bishop became a prominent preacher among Orthodox Christians because of his long-term ministry via the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) - broadcasting his message from the United Kingdom and later from the United States.

Swezey said bishop Basil, born in Imperial Russia in 1915, was "a subject of the last Tsar." She noted that the Soviet authorities prohibited any positive reference of the Romanovs and tried to erase the royal family from the collective memory. Those who attempted to commemorate the Romanovs were risking prosecution and only during the so-called Perestroika in the late 1980s when the Soviet authorities eased some policies. However, having a more objective approach toward Russia's last emperor was still out of the question at that time.

"In 1988, we were flying to Moscow with a pilgrimage group and I realized that the next day - July 17 - was the day of the memory of the Imperial family," Swezey recalled. "I walked to the bishop and said: 'We have to do something to commemorate them.'"

Bishop Basil refused the proposal as he considered that it was impossible to conduct a church service for the Russian emperor in the Soviet Union. However, when the group arrived in Moscow, a young man George Shevkunov - today known as Metropolitan Tikhon - came to the hotel.

"They came to see the bishop and to ask him to serve a commemoration for the imperial family the next day," Swezey said.

The service had been arranged at a little church on the premises of the ancient Simonov monastery, where St. Peresvet and Oslabya - heroes of the historical Kulikovo battle between Russians and the Golden Horde in 1380 - had been laid to rest.

"The future Metropolitan Tikhon asked bishop Basil to come to that church on July 17 and publicly do a service for these two monks, and after that for the Imperial Family," Swezey said. The Soviet authorities did not pay close attention to the group but bishop Basil exercised caution while serving the commemoration, Swezey said, adding that nobody participating in the event experienced any problems.

After the service, Shevkunov handed to bishop Basil two ribbons with the names of the Imperial Family, she said.

"They were on display when we served the commemoration in the church. I still keep them with bishop's archives," Swezey added.

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RPT - US Activists Urge Biden to Lift Sanctions Fueling Cuba's Economic Crisis

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is using starvation as a weapon against Havana by refusing to lift the very sanctions that helped fuel Cuba's economic crisis in the first place, including those targeting payments from relatives in America, activists told Sputnik.

Cuba has seen the largest protests in the island nation since 1994, sparked by anger over shortages of food, medicine and other basic necessities. More than 100 demonstrators have been arrested and one individual has died, according to local media.

Meanwhile, President Joe Biden, despite Cuba's dire economic situation, has so far refused to remove any sanctions that were imposed by his predecessor.

FUELING THE FIRE

On Thursday, Biden told reporters he would not ease restrictions on remittances sent from US residents to relatives in Cuba because he fears Havana will likely confiscate the money. Biden during the same press briefing also denounced socialism as a useless substitute for communism. Moreover, ever since the protests started, the US has warned Havana that it would not lift other Trump-era measures unless the government halted its crackdown.

President Donald Trump's administration reversed many of the steps the Obama administration took to normalize US-Cuban relations - a slight thaw that came after decades of tensions that began during the Cold War including a trade embargo Washington imposed in 1962.

"The US is using starvation as a weapon and cautioning the Cuban government not to use violence," National Network on Cuba Co-Chair Cheryl LaBash told Sputnik.

LaBash said she and her fellow activists expected Biden to follow through on his campaign promise to further normalize relations with Cuba and they were preparing to push him towards ending the embargo imposed during the Cold War.

"Biden is no Obama," LaBash said. "We're going into July without even a modicum of change in the policy."

For example, she said, visas used to be processed in Havana instead of sending them to a third country where 90% are denied. LaBash also blasted the restrictions on trade and corporations who have to take actions such as verify the end user.

However, LaBash also said Trump worsened the economic circumstances for Cubans throughout the course of his four years in office.

"We saw Trump six months after he came into office - he went to Miami and made a speech against Cuba then proceeded to institute 243 new sanctions and put Cuba on the terror list," LaBash said. "I know that what Trump did exceeds anything placed on Cuba and he and the US have no compunction about the effect of the sanctions on the health and medical needs of the Cuban people."

LaBash said the US "surgically determined" and targeted where Cuba gets its income, which includes remittances.

"Any avenue that Cuba might have to provide relief for its people was closed," said LaBash, herself a regular visitor to the Caribbean island.

Network in Defense of Humanity-USA member James Counts Early also blasted the Biden-Harris administration for breaking its promise to normalize relations with Cuba.

"They have continued Trump's strictures and pushed the people towards rebellion," Early told Sputnik.

Early said Obama wanted regime change too, but realized the blockade alone would not topple the Cuban government, so he pursued normalization and resumption and widening of commercial ties. Democrats and Republicans have the same goal and differ only in strategic and tactical approaches, he added.

"The US position is not to have a socialist country in this hemisphere," Early said.

Biden has discarded bilateral accords and increased the number of boat people - most of which the US has sent back to Cuba, Early said.

Early also warned that Biden is interfering with a "tricky" situation and better realize the Cuban government will do what it needs to survive.

"It's a dangerous moment but we've seen the historical precedent," Early said. "Cuba will protect its sovereignty, its territory and its integrity."

COVID CRISIS

Meanwhile, the rollout of Cuba's vaccine was delayed because US sanctions prevented raw materials from being imported, according to the Cuban government. Even now, as COVID cases in Cuba rise to their highest levels since the pandemic began, Biden has made no attempt to lift the economic restrictions.

A Cuban woman who left her country in the early 2000s in search of a better life, told Sputnik that the family she left behind has weathered extreme difficulties.

"It's a humanitarian crisis," said the woman, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "There are not enough coffins and not enough vaccines for 11 million people. Pfizer offered the Cuban government vaccine but they refused."

She said hospitals overflowing with sick people are collapsing – they have run out of medicines and beds.

Cubans routinely line up for hours at government-run grocery stores as early as 5:00 a.m., she said, while food is often rationed or unavailable which is why she buys food from an agency and they deliver it to her family.

Filmmaker Catherine Murphy believes the current situation is the intended result of what US policy has been trying to achieve for the past 60 years and the pandemic made the situation worse.

"Cuba is in this crisis because of the increased danger and mounting harm of coronavirus," Murphy told Sputnik. "The embargo and increased sanctions are so cruel."

Trump's sanctions, Murphy explained, are affecting Cubans at the macro and family level. When Trump closed down Western Union, for example, she said "it really affected people's ability to live."

Murphy said the country has been a tinderbox for months just as Cubans are unable to send money amid a pandemic.

"When COVID hit tourism evaporated and cottage industries - like family-run restaurants and renting rooms - disappeared," Murphy added.

Murphy said, at a minimum, the US should allow family remittances which, if reinstated, could dramatically improve the situation.

"If the US was really concerned with the needs of the human beings in Cuba, in the context of a global pandemic, why not open one avenue to allow revenue to come in?" Murphy asked rhetorically.

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Biden Plans to Evacuate 2,500 Afghan Interpreters to US - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration plans to evacuate 2,500 Afghan interpreters and their families to a base in the United States before the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is complete at the end of August, NBC News reported citing three administration officials.

The report on Friday said a group of 10,000 Afghan interpreters with pending background checks will be evacuated to a US military base overseas or to another safe third country.

Evacuations will begin in the coming days, the report said.

Some 20,000 Afghans who worked with US forces in Afghanistan the last 20 years have applied for a Special Immigrant Visa to move to the United States to escape threats from the Taliban.

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Little New Evidence Has Emerged in Ongoing US Probe of Coronavirus Origins - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - Little new evidence has emerged in the Biden administration's ongoing investigation into the origins of the novel coronavirus, leaving US officials stuck in the middle of determining whether the disease leaked from a lab in Wuhan or was transmitted from animals to humans, CNN reported citing multiple sources familiar with the review.

The report said on Friday that halfway through the 90-day review into the origins of the novel coronavirus, the US intelligence community is still divided on whether the disease leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan, China, or was transmitted from animals to humans.

However, top Biden administration officials such as National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and federal agencies like the CIA now think the laboratory leak theory is plausible, marking a shift in their initial thinking.

In May, President Joe Biden ordered the US intelligence community to produce a report reexamining the origins of the coronavirus and determining whether the disease leaked from a lab or spread from an infected animal to a human. The US leader gave the intelligence community 90 days to complete the report.

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Orthodox Church in America Has No Plans to Celebrate Anniversary in 2021, 2022 - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The Orthodox Church in America (OCA) currently has no specific plans to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its independence in 2021 and 2022, the OCA spokesman told Sputnik.

"Currently, there are no plans for the 50th [anniversary] celebration in 2021 or 2022," the spokesman said on Friday.

The Russian Orthodox Church granted a tomos of autocephaly, or decree of independence, to the OCA in April 1970 following decades of unsuccessful attempts of reconciliation after the Bolshevik revolution in 1917.

The OCA initially has scheduled celebrations in 2020 in Washington, DC in its major St. Nicholas cathedral, as well as in the various dioceses and deaneries, the spokesman said.

"The pandemic has been the reason why plans were canceled. Because of the pandemic, the All-American Council [of the OCA] was also postponed from July 2021 to July 2022," he added.

The OCA has its origins in a mission established by Russian monks in Alaska and currently consists of more than 700 parishes, monasteries and communities in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

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Rare Case of Person Infected With Monkeypox Virus Detected in Texas - US Health Agency

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - A rare case of a person infected with the monkeypox virus has been detected in the US state of Texas, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said in a press release.

"The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Texas Department of State Health Services confirmed on July 15 a case of human monkeypox in a US resident who recently traveled from Nigeria to the United States," the release said on Friday.

The infected individual is currently hospitalized in the city of Dallas, the release said.

The individual traveled from Lagos, Nigeria, to Dallas with a layover stop in Atlanta, and health officials are working to contact airline passengers and others who may have had contact with the infected individual, the release said.

The CDC believes the spread of monkeypox through respiratory droplets to others on airplanes and in airports is low, the release added.

Most monkeypox infections last two to four weeks and has flu-like illness that causes swelling of the lymph nodes and widespread rash on the body.

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US Climate Envoy Kerry to Travel to UK, Italy Next Week - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry is scheduled to travel to the United Kingdom and Italy next week in order to attend climate change events and meetings, the US State Department said.

"Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry will travel to London, United Kingdom from July 20 to July 21, 2021... [Kerry] will then travel on to Rome and Naples, Italy, from July 21 to July 23, 2021" the State Department said in a press release on Friday.

Kerry is set to begin his trip in the United Kingdom, where he will deliver remarks at the Royal Botanic Gardens in London on the urgency of global climate action.

The Special Presidential Envoy will then travel to Naples, Italy, where he will attend the G20 ministerial meeting on the environment, climate change and energy.

Kerry will end his trip by returning to London to meet with officials and further discuss environmental issues in the lead-up to the UN Climate Change Conference that is scheduled to take place in Glasgow this autumn.

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US Judge Blocks 'Dreamers' Immigrant Program, New Applications - Court Documents

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge has ordered the Department of Homeland Security to stop approving new applications for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which shields from deportation some young undocumented immigrants who are also referred to as Dreamers, court documents revealed.

"[Department of Homeland Security] is hereby enjoined from approving any new DACA applications and granting the attendants status," US District Judge Andrew Hanen said in the court document on Friday.

Hanen pointed out that the order does not affect current DACA recipients.

The judge explained that the DACA program violates federal law because a US president does not have legislative power to declare that a certain category of undocumented migrants is in the United States lawfully.

DACA was launched by the Obama administration in 2012. It permits children of illegal immigrants, who were brought to the United States under the age of 16, to remain in the country, provided they had arrived by 2007. The program does not currently provide permanent lawful status to its recipients but has protected some 700,000 young people from deportation. Former President Donald Trump tried to end the program but the US Supreme Court blocked his administration's effort. After taking office in January, President Joe Biden promised to preserve the program.

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Wall Street Hits Brakes on 3 Weeks of Gains as Tech Stocks Crumble

NEW YORK, July 16 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's stock indexes snapped a three-week winning streak, with the technology-heavy Nasdaq Composite particularly falling its hardest since May, as investors sold on concerns the market was overvalued amid talk the US economic recovery may be overhyped.

Friday's slump, especially, was unexpected, given that it came on the back of a rebound in US retail sales after May's slide and after a better-than-expected start this week to the corporate earnings season.

"One thing that was very clear this week is that pricing pressures are not easing," Ed Moya, analyst at New York's OANDA brokerage, said, referring to the concerns about stock overvaluations. "COVID-19 concerns still linger and the economic outlook is not as bright as it was just a few weeks ago."

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, fell almost 300 points on the day to close down 0.8 percent on the day at 34,688. The Dow lost 0.5 percent on the week for its sharpest slide in five weeks.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, fell almost 33 points, or 0.4 percent, at 4,237. For the week, the S&P lost almost 1.0 percent, also its most in five weeks.

The Nasdaq Composite, which includes high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, lost 116 points or 0.8 percent to close at 14,427. For the week, Nasdaq lost 1.9 percent, its most since the week to May 7.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) -

US SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The US Commerce Department announced on Friday that it is imposing trade restrictions against six Russian entities previously identified as acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States.

* The United States has not attributed involvement in the Kaseya ransomware cyberattack to the Russian government although the investigation is still ongoing, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

* The United States has found that Russia and China promoted their coronavirus vaccines by promoting messages that sow doubt in the Western vaccines, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday.

* Ukraine intends to tighten requirements for the entry of citizens of five countries, including Russia and Belarus, because of the "Indian" strain of coronavirus, National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov said on Friday.

RIOTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

* The death toll from riots in the South African provinces KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng has increased to 212, Kumbudzo Ntshaveni, the acting minister under the President of South Africa, said.

* Russia is not involved in any way in protests that are ongoing in South Africa, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said,

APEC MEETING

* The leaders of APEC countries intend to develop economic integration in the region in order to facilitate recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the summit's declaration says.

* New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern after meeting her counterparts at a virtual summit of the APEC called on all countries to share COVID-19 vaccines and avoid any type of vaccine nationalism.

- * The leaders of APEC countries agreed to facilitate the voluntary transfer of technology for the production of vaccines against the coronavirus and intend to step up efforts to produce and supply drugs, according to the summit's declaration.
- * Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia was ready for close cooperation with APEC on mass vaccination of the population, including migrants, against the coronavirus.
- * Russia supports the final document drafted during the virtual meeting of the leaders of the APEC countries regarding a coordinated response to the coronavirus pandemic, Putin said.

INTERNATIONAL TALKS ON AFGHANISTAN

- * Discussions have been held on including Iran and India in the Troika format on Afghanistan, which includes Russia, the US and China, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
- * A peace conference on Afghanistan, hosted by Pakistan, is most likely postponed until July 25, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
- * Russia is not interested in seeing any of the warring sides in Afghanistan emerging victorious as such a solution would be too fragile, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
- * The United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan will create a new quadrilateral diplomatic group to promote the Afghan peace process, stability and trade in the region, the State Department said.

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US Activists Urge Biden to Lift Sanctions Fueling Cuba's Economic Crisis

WASHINGTON, July 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is using starvation as a weapon against Havana by refusing to lift the very sanctions that helped fuel Cuba's economic crisis in the first place, including those targeting payments from relatives in America, activists told Sputnik.

Cuba has seen the largest protests in the island nation since 1994, sparked by anger over shortages of food, medicine and other basic necessities. More than 100 demonstrators have been arrested and one individual has died, according to local media.

Meanwhile, President Joe Biden, despite Cuba's dire economic situation, has so far refused to remove any sanctions that were imposed by his predecessor.

FUELING THE FIRE

On Thursday, Biden told reporters he would not ease restrictions on remittances sent from US residents to relatives in Cuba because he fears Havana will likely confiscate the money. Biden during the same press briefing also denounced socialism as a useless substitute for communism. Moreover, ever since the protests started, the US has warned Havana that it would not lift other Trump-era measures unless the government halted its crackdown.

President Donald Trump's administration reversed many of the steps the Obama administration took to normalize US-Cuban relations - a slight thaw that came after decades of tensions that began during the Cold War including a trade embargo Washington imposed in 1962.

"The US is using starvation as a weapon and cautioning the Cuban government not to use violence," National Network on Cuba Co-Chair Cheryl LaBash told Sputnik.

LaBash said she and her fellow activists expected Biden to follow through on his campaign promise to further normalize relations with Cuba and they were preparing to push him towards ending the embargo imposed during the Cold War.

"Biden is no Obama," LaBash said. "We're going into July without even a modicum of change in the policy."

For example, she said, visas used to be processed in Havana instead of sending them to a third country where 90% are denied. LaBash also blasted the restrictions on trade and corporations who have to take actions such as verify the end user.

However, LaBash also said Trump worsened the economic circumstances for Cubans throughout the course of his four years in office.

"We saw Trump six months after he came into office - he went to Miami and made a speech against Cuba then proceeded to institute 243 new sanctions and put Cuba on the terror list," LaBash said. "I know that what Trump did exceeds anything placed on Cuba and he and the US have no compunction about the effect of the sanctions on the health and medical needs of the Cuban people."

LaBash said the US "surgically determined" and targeted where Cuba gets its income, which includes remittances.

"Any avenue that Cuba might have to provide relief for its people was closed," said LaBash, herself a regular visitor to the Caribbean island.

Network in Defense of Humanity-USA member James Counts Early also blasted the Biden-Harris administration for breaking its promise to normalize relations with Cuba.

"They have continued Trump's strictures and pushed the people towards rebellion," Early told Sputnik.

Early said Obama wanted regime change too, but realized the blockade alone would not topple the Cuban government, so he pursued normalization and resumption and widening of commercial ties. Democrats and Republicans have the same goal and differ only in strategic and tactical approaches, he added.

"The US position is not to have a socialist country in this hemisphere," Early said.

Biden has discarded bilateral accords and increased the number of boat people - most of which the US has sent back to Cuba, Early said.

Early also warned that Biden is interfering with a "tricky" situation and better realize the Cuban government will do what it needs to survive.

"It's a dangerous moment but we've seen the historical precedent," Early said. "Cuba will protect its sovereignty, its territory and its integrity."

COVID CRISIS

Meanwhile, the rollout of Cuba's vaccine was delayed because US sanctions prevented raw materials from being imported, according to the Cuban government. Even now, as COVID cases in Cuba rise to their highest levels since the pandemic began, Biden has made no attempt to lift the economic restrictions.

A Cuban woman who left her country in the early 2000s in search of a better life, told Sputnik that the family she left behind has weathered extreme difficulties.

"It's a humanitarian crisis," said the woman, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "There are not enough coffins and not enough vaccines for 11 million people. Pfizer offered the Cuban government vaccine but they refused."

She said hospitals overflowing with sick people are collapsing – they have run out of medicines and beds.

Cubans routinely line up for hours at government-run grocery stores as early as 5:00 a.m., she said, while food is often rationed or unavailable which is why she buys food from an agency and they deliver it to her family.

Filmmaker Catherine Murphy believes the current situation is the intended result of what US policy has been trying to achieve for the past 60 years and the pandemic made the situation worse.

"Cuba is in this crisis because of the increased danger and mounting harm of coronavirus," Murphy told Sputnik. "The embargo and increased sanctions are so cruel."

Trump's sanctions, Murphy explained, are affecting Cubans at the macro and family level. When Trump closed down Western Union, for example, she said "it really affected people's ability to live."

Murphy said the country has been a tinderbox for months just as Cubans are unable to send money amid a pandemic.

"When COVID hit tourism evaporated and cottage industries - like family-run restaurants and renting rooms - disappeared," Murphy added.

Murphy said, at a minimum, the US should allow family remittances which, if reinstated, could dramatically improve the situation.

"If the US was really concerned with the needs of the human beings in Cuba, in the context of a global pandemic, why not open one avenue to allow revenue to come in?" Murphy asked rhetorically.

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Ford Announces 3 Recalls Including for More Than 750,000 Explorers - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The Ford Motor Company on Friday issued three safety recalls for certain Explorer sport utility vehicles as well as for Lincoln Aviator vehicles, citing concerns over increased crash and fire risks.

"Ford is issuing a safety recall for approximately 774,696 2013-2017 Ford Explorer vehicles that may experience a seized cross-axis ball joint that may cause a fractured rear suspension toe link. Affected vehicles may experience a clunk noise, unusual handling, or a misaligned rear wheel. Fracture of a rear toe link significantly diminishes steering control, increasing the risk of a crash," the company said in a statement.

Ford also issued a safety recall for approximately 34,939 2020-2021 F-350 Super Duty vehicles with 6.7-liter engine and single rear wheel axle for a rear axle housing spring seat interface weld issue that can result in a disconnected driveshaft. This places the vehicle at risk of losing motive power or transmission park function, increasing the chances of an accident.

The company said that it has likewise issued a safety recall for the Lincoln luxury line, as approximately 40,995 2020-2021 Lincoln Aviator vehicles equipped with three-liter gas engines have insecure battery cable wire harnesses.

Ford also said it plans on releasing owner notifications in the coming weeks with instructions on when and how to have the vehicles inspected and potentially fixed should they have the aforementioned defects.

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Websites of Cuban Diplomatic Missions Worldwide Inaccessible

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The websites of Cuba's diplomatic missions throughout the world are down and not accessible for using as of Friday.

When attempting to open any of them, including in Russia, the United States or Canada, they all say, "Not Found. HTTP Error 404. The requested resource is not found."

Neither the Embassy in Washington DC, nor the Foreign Ministry have responded to Sputnik's requests on the matter at the time of publishing the story.

Cuba's foreign ministry said via Twitter that since July 11, when demonstrations took place in the country, its website has been under DDoS attacks from the United States, Europe and Turkey, noting that these locations could be a disguise.

The Cuban authorities cut internet access in an attempt to crack down on protests in the country.

US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that the United States is considering whether it has technological means to restore internet access for the Cuban people.

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Biden Picks US Ambassadors to New Zealand, Bosnia-Herzegovina - White House

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced a list of seven individuals he plans to nominate for various positions, including ambassadors to New Zealand, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the White House said on Friday.

Some of the individuals Biden intends to nominate include Tom Udall for the position Ambassador to New Zealand and Samoa and Michael Murphy for the position Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Biden also announced his intended nominations for the ambassadors to Brunei and Botswana as well as lesser cabinet positions, including Under Secretary for Standards and Technology, Assistant Secretary of the Air Force and Assistant Secretary for Veterans Employment and Training.

Udall most recently served two terms as a US Senator representing the state of New Mexico. He is known as a champion for protecting the environment, election reforms and the peaceful resolution of international disputes.

Murphy is a long-time member of the Senior Foreign Service, holding the rank of Minister-Counselor. He presently serves in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, where he oversees European security and bilateral relations with the Northern European and Baltic countries.

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US Seeks 15-Year Term for Russian National Levashov on Hacking Charges - Court Document

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The US government recommends sentencing Russian national Peter Levashov, who pleaded guilty to fraud and computer crime in 2018, to a prison term ranging from 12 years to 14 years and 7 months, according to the memorandum in aid of sentencing submitted to the court.

"Based on an adjusted offense level of 32, a criminal history category of I, and the mandatory consecutive sentence required under Count 8, the recommended Sentencing Guidelines range is 145 to 175 months in prison," the memorandum said.

Levashov's sentencing is scheduled for July 20 after being initially scheduled for September 6, 2019 and changed multiple times.

Levashov pleaded guilty to one count of causing intentional damage to a protected computer, one count of conspiracy, one count of wire fraud and one count of aggravated identity theft. He was detained by Spanish police in the city of Barcelona in April 2017 at the request of the United States on suspicion of hacking. On October 3, 2017 a Spanish court agreed to extradite Levashov to the United States. The verdict was appealed by Levashov's lawyers but the court's decision was confirmed.

In early February 2018, Spain extradited Levashov to the United States where he pleaded not guilty to cybercrime charges at the first hearing in a Bridgeport court in the US state of Connecticut.

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Guterres Asks UNSC to Increase Mali Peacekeeping Force Amid Terrorist Violence - Report

UNITED NATIONS, July 16 (Sputnik) - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has asked the UN Security Council to expand the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) amid the growing insecurity and terrorist threat in the country, a report, seen by Sputnik, said.

"Considering the increasingly complex challenges MINUSMA is facing, the growing level of insecurity and physical violence against the civilian population in central Mali and the expanding terrorist threat more broadly, scaling up MINUSMA's uniformed personnel capacity would enhance the ability of the Mission to protect civilians in central Mali and create further space for the peace process in the North," Guterres said in the report.

The UN chief proposed to deploy an additional 2,069 uniformed personnel, comprised of 1,730 military troops, 300 formed police unit personnel and 39 individual police officers.

The deployment, if authorized by the council, would bring the number of the mission's military personnel to 17,278.

Guterres also proposed to deploy three Quick Reaction Force companies comprised of 750 troops and establish two Military Utility Helicopter units with up to 10 helicopters and 260 personnel.

"In an increasingly challenging security environment, additional air assets are urgently needed to enable the Mission to deliver on its mandate," Guterres said.

The situation in Mali was destabilized in 2012 when the Tuareg militants seized vast territories in the north. The country has also been roiled by Islamist insurgency since militants linked to the al-Qaeda terror group (banned in Russia) hijacked the Tuareg rebellion.

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US Charges 2 Men With Plot to Blow Up Democratic Headquarters in California- Justice Dept. WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The US government has charged two California men with amassing a large supply of weapons and ammunition and plotting to blow up the Democratic Party headquarters in Sacramento, the Justice Department said on Friday.

"Today, the federal court in San Francisco unsealed an indictment charging two California men with conspiracy to destroy a building affecting interstate commerce, and related crimes, in a scheme to attack the John L. Burton Democratic Headquarters in Sacramento," the Justice Department said in a news release.

According to court documents, Ian Benjamin Rogers, 45, of Napa and Jarrod Copeland, 37 of Vallejo, began planning to attack targets they associated with Democrats after the 2020 Presidential election and planned to use incendiary devices to attack their targets.

"Firebombing your perceived political opponents is illegal and does not nurture the sort of open and vigorous debate that created and supports our constitutional democracy," US Attorney Stephanie Hinds said.

According to court documents, on January 15 law enforcement officers searched Rogers's home and business and seized a cache of weapons, including 45 to 50 firearms, thousands of rounds of ammunition, and five pipe bombs, the Justice Department said.

If convicted, the defendants face a maximum statutory sentence of 20 years imprisonment, a three-year term of supervised release, and a \$250,000 fine for the conspiracy charge, the Justice Department added.

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US Apprehends Nearly 189,000 Migrants Illegally Crossing Southern Border in June - CBP

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - US immigration enforcement apprehended nearly 189,000 migrants illegally crossing the United States' southern border with Mexico in the month of June, which is the highest monthly total in 21 years, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) revealed on Friday.

CBP data shows that Border Patrol agents apprehended 188,829 migrants on the US southern border in the month of June, bringing the total number of apprehensions in the region since October to 1.1 million.

The data shows 178,416 migrants were immediately returned to Mexico after they were apprehended.

Data shows that a majority of migrants apprehended at the southern border in June are from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

The United States has apprehended more than 1.5 million illegal migrants at the southern border with Mexico in 1986, 1996, 1998-2000, according to CBP data.

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Biden, Erdogan Top Advisers Discuss 'Range of Regional Issues' - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Chief Adviser to the President of Turkey Ibrahim Kalin discussed a range of regional issues in a phone call on Friday, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said in statement.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke by phone today with Ibrahim Kalin, Spokesperson and Chief Adviser to the President of Turkey. Following the meeting between President Joe Biden and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on June 14, Mr. Sullivan and Dr. Kalin discussed a range of regional issues," Horne said.

Earlier this week, the Pentagon reported that the United States and Turkey are currently discussing what security at the Kabul international airport will look like once US forces complete the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

At an event on Friday, Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister Yavuz Selim Kiran said his government has sent the Biden administration more than 200 requests to extradite the Gulen movement leader and its members whom Ankara has accused of instigated the 2016 coup.

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Biden Says Misinformation About Coronavirus Vaccines Kills People

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday that misinformation about the coronavirus vaccines on major social platforms kills people by fueling the pandemic among unvaccinated people.

"They're killing people. The only pandemic we have is among the unvaccinated. And they're killing people," Biden was quoted as saying by the White House pool.

The Biden administration is reaching out to social media, including Facebook, among a series of steps to fight alleged misinformation that undermines public trust in the coronavirus vaccines.

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Canada Sets Wholesale Sales Record for Third Consecutive Month - Statistics Agency

July 16 (Sputnik) - Canadian wholesale sales grew by 0.5 percent in May, renewing the all-time record for the third month in a row, the state statistics agency said on Friday.

"Sales of wholesale products rose 0.5% in May to C\$72.2 billion [\$57.31 billion USD], setting a record high for the sector for a third consecutive month," Statistics Canada said in its monthly wholesale trade report.

The growth was largely attributable to a 2.7 percent rise in the food, beverage and tobacco subsector, the agency said.

The rise in sale was led by the provinces of Ontario and British Columbia, where wholesale sales rose by 1.3 and 5.3 percent, respectively, Statistics Canada said.

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Yellen to Convene Multi-Agency Working Group to Discuss Stablecoins Next Week - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department on Friday said Secretary Janet Yellen will convene a multi-agency group next week to discuss the merits of stablecoins as a form of payment system.

"Yellen announced plans to convene the President's Working Group on Financial Markets (PWG), in addition to the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, to discuss interagency work on stablecoins. The group will meet Monday, July 19," the department said in a statement.

Yellen, in the same statement, said bringing together regulators will enable the US to assess the potential benefits of stablecoins while mitigating risks they could pose to users, markets, or the financial system.

"In light of the rapid growth in digital assets, it is important for the agencies to collaborate on the regulation of this sector and the development of any recommendations for new authorities," she said.

Stablecoins are pegged to a cryptocurrency or exchange-traded commodities. They are designed to be price-stable digital assets that behave somewhat like fiat currency but maintain the mobility and utility of cryptocurrency, without the attendant volatility of digital money like Bitcoin.

Cryptocurrencies have been gaining popularity over the years with investors. But governments have generally been wary of them for fear that they could be used for funding illicit activity. Even central banks, including the US Federal Reserve, plan to launch their own digital coins in the future.

The President's Working Group on Financial Markets was established to enhance the integrity, efficiency, orderliness, and competitiveness of US financial markets. In addition to the Treasury Secretary, its members include the chairs of the Federal Reserve and Securities and Exchange Commission, and the acting chair of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission.

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US Sees 'Significant Risk' That Tigray Conflict Will Spread Beyond Region - State Dept.
WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned that the ongoing conflict in Tigray will spill over beyond the region, State Department spokesperson Jalina Porter told reporters on Friday.

"The United States, of course, is gravely concerned about the reports of ongoing hostilities in Tigray," Porter said. "There is of course significant risk that this conflict may expand outside of that region. All parties need to end the hostilities and pursue a negotiated ceasefire immediately."

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Biden to Hold Second Cabinet Meeting of His Administration on Tuesday - White House

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will be convening his full cabinet to meet for the second time since his administration began, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"On Tuesday, the President will hold his second cabinet meeting of his administration, his first in the cabinet room," Psaki said at a press briefing.

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Turkey Sent US 200 Requests to Extradite Gulen Movement Members - Deputy Foreign Minister

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - Turkey has sent some 200 requests to the American authorities to extradite US-based Islamic cleric Fethullah Gulen and his followers, Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister Yavuz Selim Kiran said on Friday.

"We continue to demand from US administration to hand over FETO ring leader and his followers to Turkish justice. We submitted around 200 extradition requests," Kiran said at an event hosted by the Washington-based Turkish Heritage Organization.

On Thursday, Turkish Ambassador to the United States Hasan Murat Mercan told Sputnik Ankara is in close contact with Washington on the possible extradition of Gulen and hopes it will happen under the Biden administration.

The Turkish government defines the transnational Islamic movement of Fethullah Gulen as FETO which is the acronym for Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization and has accused Gulen and his movement of being the main initiator of the failed coup attempt of 2016.

Gulen and members of his movement reject the allegations. They define themselves as the Hizmet (service) movement and oppose being defined as a terrorist organization. The US refuses to extradite the activist back home.

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US Has Not Attributed Russian Government's Involvement in Kaseya Cyberattack - White House

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The US has not attributed involvement in the Kaseya ransomware cyberattack to the Russian government although the investigation is still ongoing, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"We have not attributed the Russian government's involvement in this case. It's an ongoing review but we have not [attributed to them]. We don't have any new information on that front," Psaki said at a press briefing.

The Russia-linked hacking group REvil is currently alleged to have been responsible.

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US Sanctions 7 Individuals Over Hong Kong, Warns Against Doing Business in Territory

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration said on Friday that it has imposed Hong Kong-related sanctions on seven individuals and warned companies of the risks of doing business in the territory.

"In the face of Beijing's decisions over the past year that have stifled the democratic aspirations of people in Hong Kong, we are taking action," US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said in a statement citing the sanctions and actions taken in pursuant to China's new rules governing Hong Kong. "Today we send a clear message that the United States resolutely stands with Hong Kongers."

The State Department said it sanctioned Chen Dong, Yang Jianping, Qiu Hong, Lu Xinning, Tan Tieniu, He Jing and Yin Zonghua, who are Deputy Directors of the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (LOCPG).

The LOCPG is China's main platform for projecting its influence in Hong Kong and has repeatedly undermined the high degree of autonomy promised for Hong Kong in the Sino-British Joint declaration.

The Treasury Department said in an advisory that those operating in Hong Kong or have interests there should understand the new legal landscape in the territory.

"Businesses, individuals, and other persons, including academic institutions, research service providers, and investors that operate in Hong Kong, or have exposure to sanctioned individuals or entities, should be aware of changes to Hong Kong's laws and regulations," the advisory, jointly issued by the Treasury Department along with the departments of State, Commerce and Homeland Security, said..

Blinken noted that over the past year, Chinese and Hong Kong officials at the LOCPG have systematically undermined Hong Kong's democratic institutions, delayed elections, disqualified elected lawmakers from office, and forced officials to take loyalty oaths to keep their jobs.

"Beijing has chipped away at Hong Kong's reputation of accountable, transparent governance and respect for individual freedoms, and has broken its promise to leave Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy unchanged for 50 years," he said. "We will continue to stand up for the rights and freedoms guaranteed to people in Hong Kong by the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law."

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US Airlines Operated 517,000 Flights in May, 76% of Pre-Covid Level - Transportation Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The total number of flights operated by US air carriers in May was 517,709, times more than a year ago and 24 percent below the pre-pandemic level in 2019, consumer data from the Transportation Department said on Friday.

"The total number of flights operated in May 2021 has reached 76 percent of pre-pandemic levels with 517,709 flights operated in May 2021 and 680,165 flights operated in May 2019. Flights operated in May 2021 (517,709) were more than double the flights operated in May 2020 (180,151)," the Transportation Department said in a press release.

Out of the total number of flights in May, 520,059 were operated and 2,350, or 0.5 percent, were cancelled with 86.2 percent of flights arriving on-time. Hawaiian Airlines, Delta Airlines and Alaska Airlines showed the best on-time arrival rates in May, the release said.

Compared to last month's data there were 8.2 percent less flight cancellations and nearly 10 percent more flights operated.

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Russia, China of Promote Their COVID-19 Vaccines By Undermining Western Ones - Psaki

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The United States has found that Russia and China promoted their coronavirus vaccines by promoting messages that sow doubt in the Western vaccines, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday.

"The State Department's Global Engagement Center has found that Russia and China have promoted their own vaccines through messaging that undermines Western-origin vaccines... That is more than just competition about vaccines," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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Blinken Says Discussed With Chile Counterpart Coronavirus Response, Climate Change

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday that he met with his Chilean counterpart Andres Allamand and discussed the coronavirus pandemic, climate change and other issues of mutual concern.

"We are working together across virtually all of the major issues of our time, of course, COVID-19, where Chile has done remarkable work, climate change, where Chile is a leader," Blinken told reporters.

The United States and Chile have a very strong bilateral agenda and share a commitment to democracy and human rights, Blinken added.

Allamand said the meeting gives both countries an opportunity to take a look at the state of democracy and human rights in the region as well as strengthen cooperation in areas of mutual interest, including post- coronavirus pandemic recovery.

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Canada to See Cyber Intrusion in Political Process, But Lower-Priority Target - CSE

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - Canada will experience some cyber interference in its political affairs, but the country remains a "low-priority target" for foreign actors, country's communications intelligence service said on Friday.

"Canada remains a lower-priority target for cyber threat activity targeting its democratic process relative to some other countries. However, we judge it very likely that Canadian voters will encounter some form of foreign cyber interference ahead of, and during, the next federal election," the Communications Security Establishment (CSE) said in a report.

The "Cyber Threats to Canada's Democratic Process" report underscored that Canada is unlikely to see incursions on the scale allegedly seen in south of the border. US authorities continue to maintain that Russia, as well as China and Iran are waging cyber campaigns with the goal of undermining its political system.

While the CSE did not mention specific threats to Canada from foreign adversaries, the report noted that since 2015, Russia, China and Iran were responsible for 90 percent of malign cyber activity against "democratic processes" world-wide.

According to the biennial document, malign cyber activity is used to target voters, political parties and elections through online disinformation, misinformation and cyberattacks, exploiting an increasingly digitalized political environment.

While the CSE believes Canada is not a top priority for cyber actors, the agency warns Canadians' interconnectedness with US social media sphere - 57 percent of Twitter accounts Canadians follow are US-based - leaves them vulnerable to cyber activity targeting Americans and their political system.

The CSE report comes ahead of, what most Canadian experts agree is, a federal election later in the year.

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Biden Will Look for Ways to Engage With China's Xi, No Plans Set Now - White House

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will look for opportunities to engage with Chinese President Xi Jinping, but there are no plans scheduled now, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"As it relates to plans for the President, as we've said he will look for opportunities to engage with President Xi, we don't have any particular plans at this moment, no decisions have been made, but we'll continue to evaluate what's appropriate and what would be constructive and the relationship moving forward," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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Yellen Says Trump Tariffs, Trade Deal With China 'Hurt American Consumers' - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration's tariffs on China and the subsequent trade deal between the two countries have both hurt US consumers, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen told the New York Times in an interview published on Friday.

"Tariffs are taxes on consumers, in some cases it seems to me what we did hurt American consumers and the type of deal that the prior administration negotiated really didn't address in many ways the fundamental problems we have with China," Yellen said.

Yellen's comments came as the Biden administration is in the seventh month of an extensive review of the United States' economic relationship with China. The review seeks to answer the question about what the Biden administration needs to do about the trade deal former President Donald Trump concluded with China that includes Beijing's commitments to buy US products and reform its trade practices.

Biden has undone most of Trump's executive orders on immigration, climate and other matters, but has left intact the tariffs Trump imposed on China, indicating that his administration would likely use them in the future to pressure Beijing into making concessions on trade and other issues.

The trade deal Trump concluded with China in January 2020 requires Beijing to buy at least \$200 billion more of US goods and services over two years - in 2020 and 2021 - on top of its purchases in 2017.

In the first year of the deal, China imported about \$100 billion of US goods, making up 58 percent of the actual targeted volume of \$173.1 billion for 2020 - data tracked by the Peterson Institute for International Economics showed.

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US Joins African Union, Gavi Alliance to Provide Coronavirus Vaccines to Africa - Blinken

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has teamed up with the African Union and the Gavi Alliance, formerly known as the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, to provide 25 million coronavirus vaccine doses for the people of Africa, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"The United States, working with the African Union and Gavi is sharing 25 million COVID-19 vaccines with the peoples of Africa to save lives and build a safer, more secure world for all," Blinken said via Twitter message.

The vaccine doses will be delivered through COVAX mechanism to 49 countries in the coming weeks, Blinken said.

The GAVI Alliance is a global health partnership of public and private sector organizations dedicated to immunization for all.

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US Commerce Department Announces Adding 6 Russian Entities on Its Blacklist

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The US Commerce Department announced on Friday that it is imposing trade restrictions against six Russian entities previously identified as acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States.

"These six entities... are being added consistent with Executive Order 14024, Blocking Property With Respect To Specified Harmful Foreign Activities of the Government of the Russian Federation, issued on April 15, 2021," the Commerce Department said.

The entities include - Aktsionernoe Obshchestvo AST, Aktsionernoe Obshchestvo Pasit, Aktsionernoe Obshchestvo Pozitiv Teknologzhiz, Federal State Autonomous Institution Military Innovative Technopolis Era, Federal State Autonomous Scientific Establishment Scientific Research Institute Specialized Security Computing Devices and Automation Obshchestvo s Ogranichennoi Otvetstvennostyu NEOBIT.

The entities have all been previously targeted by the US Treasury Department sanctions for allegedly operating in the technology sector of the Russian Federation economy that support Russian Intelligence Services.

On April 15, US President Joe Biden declared a national emergency with respect to alleged specified harmful foreign activities of the Russian government. Biden's Executive Order 14024 provides a legal basis for sanctions against Russia over alleged election meddling, cyberattacks, persecution of dissidents and journalists. Russia has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing.

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UN Chief Urges States to Cooperate With Efforts to Reach Justice in MH17 Case - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, July 16 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on all member states to fully cooperate with all efforts to identify those responsible for downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine ahead of the seventh anniversary of the tragic event, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Friday.

"Tomorrow, the 17th of July, will mark the seventh anniversary of the downing of Malaysia airlines flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine. Our thoughts are with the families of the 298 people who lost their lives on that tragic day," Haq said

"The Secretary-General acknowledges the important work of the independent Joint Investigation Team and takes note of the legal proceedings taking place in the Netherlands. He once again calls on all member states to fully cooperate with all efforts to establish accountability and justice for those who perished in the downing of flight MH17, pursuant to Security Council resolution," he said.

The the Joint Investigation Team, comprised of officials from the Dutch Public Prosecution Service, the Dutch police and criminal justice authorities from Australia, Belgium, Malaysia and Ukraine, was established to lead the criminal investigation into downing of the Kuala Lumpur-bound Malaysian Boeing that crashed in July 2014 while flying over a conflict zone in eastern Ukraine.

The international group of investigators claims that the plane was downed by a Buk missile belonging to the Russian armed forces — an allegation repeatedly denied by Moscow. Russia said it has provided the Dutch investigators not only with Russian radar data but also the documents proving that the Buk missile, which hit the Boeing, actually belonged to the Ukrainian forces and was launched from territory controlled by Kiev.

The trial of four suspects in the case, three Russian citizens and one Ukrainian citizen, began in March 2020 in the Netherlands.

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Biden Pushed for Multilateral Cooperation in Indo-Pacific During APEC Talks - White House

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden promoted the need for multilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region during a virtual meeting the leaders of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) countries, the White House said on Friday.

"Biden emphasized the importance of multilateral cooperation and reiterated his commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific," the White House said in a press release.

Biden talked about opportunities to increase the economic strength of the Indo-Pacific countries and deepening US trade ties to the region, the release said.

The United States is increasingly concerned with China's growing military power in the Indo-Pacific region and strives to scale up its presence there. In June, media reported that the US Defense Department was mulling a deployment of a permanent naval task force in the Pacific.

The APEC platform was founded in 1989 and convenes 21 countries linked to the Asia-Pacific region, including Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, the United States and Vietnam.

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C5+1 Nations Reinforce Commitment to Afghanistan During Central and South Asia Conference

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The C5+1 group of countries comprising the five Central Asian states and the United States issued a joint statement on Friday re-affirming their commitment to bolster security and stability in the region, including in Afghanistan.

"Visionary ideas for Central Asia's economic growth and closer ties to the economies of South Asia also reinforce the C5+1's commitment to strengthening the region's security and stability, including through Afghan peace negotiations," the joint statement said.

The C5+1 expressed their desire to create conditions conducive to the Afghan peace process, including a negotiated political settlement that respects the fundamental rights of all Afghans, a

new government that will not be imposed through force and negating Afghanistan's territory to be used as staging ground for terrorists.

The C5+1 also mentioned their endeavor to work with Afghanistan as a group across a number of areas outside of the issues concerning regional security and the peace process, including energy, economic, and cultural cooperation.

The joint statement was adopted during a conference Central and South Asian regional connectivity in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

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US Extends Condolences to Victims of Bus Explosion in Pakistan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The United States extended its condolences to the victims of a deadly bus explosion that occurred in Pakistan this week, the US State Department said on Friday.

"We are deeply saddened to hear of the recent bus explosion in Pakistan. We mourn the lost lives and express our heartfelt condolences to all who were injured and their families," the State Department said in a statement.

The explosion occurred on Wednesday in the Khyber Paktunkhawa province in Pakistan and involved a bus carrying workers to an hydroelectric plant that was under construction. Thirteen people were killed in the blast, including nine Chinese nationals.

Indian media reported that Pakistan's foreign ministry said the blast was caused by mechanical failure, however, China ruled it a terrorist attack. Pakistan's Federal Minister for Information Fawad Ahmed Chaudhry confirmed there were traces of explosives found on the bus, the report said.

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang spoke with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and urged him to hold accountable the culprits responsible for the blast, the report said.

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Chinese National Sentenced to Prison for Plot to Export US Military Boat Engines to China

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - A Chinese national has been sentenced to three years in prison for trying to illegally export US military boat engines to China, the Justice Department said on Friday.

"A Chinese national was sentenced Wednesday to three years and six months in federal prison for conspiring to submit false export information through the federal government's Automated Export System and to export maritime raiding craft and engines to China fraudulently, and attempting to export that equipment fraudulently in violation of US law," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Chinese national Ge Songtao, 51, had pleaded guilty in November 2020, the release said. Songtao was the chairman of the Shanghai Breeze Technology company based in China, the release added.

The US military boats and engines Songtao targeted use engines for which there is no equivalent in China, and can operate using gasoline, diesel fuel or jet fuel, according to the release.

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US Reports 70% Increase in 7-Day Average Number of Coronavirus Cases - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reported a nearly 70 percent increase in the number of coronavirus cases over the seven-day period while hospitalizations and deaths are also on the rise amid the prevalence of the more transmissible Delta variant, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said on Friday.

"Yesterday, CDC reported more than 33,000 new cases of COVID-19. Our seven day average is about 26,300 cases per day and this represents an increase of nearly 70 percent from the prior seven day average. The seven day average of hospital admissions is about 2790 per day, an increase of about 36 percent from the previous seven day period and after weeks of declines, seven day average daily deaths have increased by 26 percent to 211 per day," Walensky said during a press briefing.

Walensky said the Biden administration is concerned about the increase in cases, hospitalizations and deaths among unvaccinated people to come as the new surge becomes a pandemic for those who decided not get the jab.

More than 185 million Americans have received at least one dose of the experimental vaccine and 160 million have been fully vaccinated, according to the CDC.

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Myanmar Crisis Risks Leaving Entire Generation of Children Damaged - UN Child Rights Cmte.

UNITED NATIONS, July 16 (Sputnik) - The UN Child Rights Committee Chair Mikiko Otani warned on Friday the ongoing political crisis in Myanmar caused by the military coup threatens to leave an entire generation of children damaged.

"As a result of the military coup and conflicts, children's right to life, survival and development have been repeatedly violated," Otani said in a statement. "If this crisis continues, an entire generation of children is at risk of suffering profound physical, psychological, emotional, educational and economic consequences, depriving them of a healthy and productive future." Otani noted that some 75 children have been killed, 1,000 detained and many others have been deprived of critical medical care and education since the military coup on February 1.

"Children are exposed to indiscriminate violence, random shootings and arbitrary arrests every day. They have guns pointed at them, and see the same happen to their parents and siblings," Otani said.

In addition, a million children in Myanmar are missing essential vaccinations and more than 40,000 children have been deprived of access to treatment for severe acute malnutrition, Otani added.

The UN Child Rights Committee is calling for immediate action to be taken to reach a peaceful solution in Myanmar and protect children's rights, according to the statement.

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US Retail Sales Up 0.6% in June, Rebounding After May Slump of 1.3% - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - US retail sales, a bellwether of consumer sentiment, increased by 0.6 percent in June, rebounding after a 1.3 percent decline in May, the Commerce Department said on Friday.

"Advance estimates of US retail and food services sales for June 2021, adjusted for seasonal variation and holiday and trading-day differences, but not for price changes, were \$621.3 billion, an increase of 0.6 percent from the previous month," the Commerce Department said in a statement.

Year-on-year, retail sales were still up some 18 percent from June 2020, reflecting inflationary pressures evident with the economy's full reopening from the COVID-19 crisis and its encounter with broken supply chains after a year of pandemic-related disruptions.

May's drop in retail sales was attributed to the end of COVID-19 stimulus payments of \$1,400 per individual sent out by the Biden administration in stages between March and April.

Economists polled by US media had anticipated a monthly contraction of 0.3 percent in June to extend May's dip.

"You can see that it's back on trend," economist Adam Button said in a comment posted on ForexLive, referring to the June numbers. However, Button added that the rebound could have been higher than 0.3 percent because that was "what you would expect though, especially if you're looking for a reopening boom ... an overshoot for the number of (pandemic) months and burst of spending."

The US economy grew by an annualized rate of 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021 after a 3.5 percent contraction for all of 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the COVID-19. The Federal Reserve envisions a 6.5 percent expansion for all of this year, although some central bank officials have forecasted growth of up to 7 percent.

However, the problem the Federal Reserve faces is inflation as prices of most commodities and products have soared. The Personal Consumption Expenditure Index increased by a multiyear high of 3.4 percent in the 12 months to May when stripped of volatile food and energy prices.

The US Consumer Price Index, a more popular inflation gauge used worldwide, increased by 5.4 percent over a one-year period in June for its largest increase in 13 years, the Labor Department announced on Tuesday.

The Federal Reserve has insisted the inflationary pressures are "transient" and will fade as the economy makes a full recovery, adding that it plans to increase interest rates in 2023.

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US Commerce Department Announces Adding 6 Russian Entities on Its Blacklist

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The US Commerce Department announced on Friday that it is imposing trade restrictions against six Russian entities previously identified as acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States.

"These six entities, all of which are being added under the destination of Russia, have been determined by the US Government to be acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States and are being added consistent with Executive Order 14024, Blocking Property With Respect To Specified Harmful Foreign Activities of the Government of the Russian Federation, issued on April 15, 2021," the Commerce Department said.

The entities include - Aktsionernoe Obshchestvo AST, Aktsionernoe Obshchestvo Pasit, Aktsionernoe Obshchestvo Pozitiv Tekhnologichiz, Federal State Autonomous Institution Military Innovative Technopolis Era, Federal State Autonomous Scientific Establishment Scientific Research Institute Specialized Security Computing Devices and Automation Obshchestvo s Ogranichennoi Otvetstvennostyu NEOBIT.

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F-35 Jet to Be 'Cornerstone' of US Fighter Fleet for Foreseeable Future - Air Force

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter will be the backbone of the US fighter fleet in the foreseeable future, US Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Charles Brown told reporters on Friday.

"The F-35 is a cornerstone of our fighter fleet, and it will be for a foreseeable future," Brown said during telephonic press briefing.

Brown expressed confidence in F-35 program despite recent criticism that the program has not addressed the aircraft's more than 860 remaining technical issues. The general said the aircraft's capability will be beneficial not now, but in the future.

"[T]he capability we have today does extremely well," Brown said.

The F-35 development began in 2001 and the weapon system has turned out to be most the expensive one in US history. The F-35 program has been delayed more than eight years and is \$165 billion over the original cost expectations, according to the Government Accountability Office.

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US Convicts 2 Men for \$4.5M In Telemarketing Fraud - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - A federal jury has convicted two men over their roles in an international conspiracy that defrauded elderly victims of nearly \$4.5 million, the US Justice Department said on Friday.

"A federal jury convicted two men Wednesday for their roles in a \$4.5 million telemarketing scheme that defrauded victims in the United States from a call center in Costa Rica," the Justice Department said in a press release. "Manuel Chavez, 30, of Miami, Florida, and Mark Oman, 36, of Long Beach, Washington, participated in a fraudulent telemarketing scheme in which co-conspirators, who falsely posed as US government officials, contacted victims in the United States to tell them that they had won a substantial 'sweepstakes' prize."

The Justice Department said the victims were asked to make up-front payments if they wanted to receive a "prize" but were not given anything. Chavez and Oman operated in the United States and Costa Rica, where a fraudulent call center collected funds, the release said.

Each of the defendants was convicted of one count of conspiracy to commit mail and wire fraud, six counts of wire fraud, one count of conspiracy to commit international money laundering and six counts of international money laundering and up to 20 years in prison per count, according to the release.

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Canada Working to 'Do Right' by Afghan Interpreters, More to Say in Near Future - Minister

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) – Canada is working to assist Afghan interpreters who are facing imminent danger amid the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and Ottawa will have more to say in the near future, Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino said on Friday.

"We know Afghans put their own lives at risk by helping the Canadian effort in the war. We want to do right by them, and we hope to have more to say about that in the near future," Medicino said during a press briefing.

The minister explained that his department is surveying its options in conjunction with the Department of National Defense and Global Affairs Canada, adding that Canada has resources in place in Afghanistan to ensure the safety of any operation once a decision is reached in Ottawa.

The Conference of Defense Associations Institute (CDA Institute) issued a statement welcoming the Mendicino's comments, however, noting that Ottawa must do more to help Afghans who, according to the Institute's president, saved Canadian lives.

"These courageous women and men helped to preserve Canadian lives at great risk to themselves and their families," Lt.-Gen Guy Thibault, former Vice Chief of the Defence Staff and President of the Conference of Defence Associations "Our nation has a debt. We owe them care and compassion, especially at this critical and frightening juncture. Beyond immediate action to accelerate screening and visa processing, we should also be facilitating safe transit to the extent that we can."

The government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is under pressure to do more, with the Taliban (banned in Russia) on track to reclaim control over Afghanistan after foreign troops complete

their withdrawal, which would leave translators for NATO forces, who the terror group views as traitors, in a precarious position.

Official opposition leader, Erin O'Toole, on Thursday slammed Trudeau, urging the government to set a date for the extraction of interpreters out of Afghanistan.

On Tuesday, the US Central Command said the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan is more than 95 percent complete. Meanwhile, reports suggest that the Taliban movement now controls 85 percent of Afghanistan.

The evacuation of Afghan interpreters is also a hot topic in the United States, where officials have said that aides to the US mission in Afghanistan will be relocated to third countries while their special immigrant visas are processed.

The Canadian military, which was primarily active in Kandahar, exited the Afghan war in 2014.

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APEC Leaders at Summit Voice Support for COVID-19 Vaccine Patent Waivers - Ardern

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The issue of vaccine patent waivers was discussed at Friday's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting, and many countries showed support for the idea, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said at a press conference.

"There was a discussion on the issue of waivers, many countries speaking in support of that," Ardern said after the summit, adding that other challenges still need to be addressed.

The administration of US President Joe Biden earlier this week expressed support for waiving intellectual property protections for COVID-19 vaccines and pledged to discuss the issue at the World Trade Organization (WTO). A number of countries have since backed the idea.

However, several EU leaders and pharmaceutical companies have opposed the idea of a patent waiver, urging their counterparts to look for more effective ways to combat the pandemic and boost vaccine distribution.

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Ardern Calls on Countries to Share Vaccines, Avoid Nationalism at APEC Summit

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern after meeting her counterparts at a virtual summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) called on all countries to share COVID-19 vaccines and avoid any type of vaccine nationalism.

"We need to speed up the flow of vaccines across borders. As leaders, we [should] focus on how to get vaccines to everyone as soon as possible. This means we have collective agreement to move beyond vaccine nationalism," Ardern told journalists after the virtual meeting.

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US Sanctions 7 Individuals Over Hong Kong, Warns Against Doing Business in Territory

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration on Friday imposed Hong Kong-related sanctions on seven individuals and warned companies of the risks of doing business in the territory, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in a notice on its website.

"The US Departments of State, Commerce, Homeland Security and the Treasury issued an advisory to highlight growing risks associated with actions undertaken by the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) that could adversely impact US companies that operate in the Hong Kong SAR of the People's Republic of China," the notice said.

The notice indicated that seven individuals have been added to OFAC's list of Specially Designated Nationals.

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Canada Creates New Refugee Stream for Human Rights Advocates – Statement

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) – Ottawa is creating a new refugee stream that will see up to 250 foreign human rights advocates resettled in Canada every year, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada said on Friday.

"Canada will become one of the first countries to offer a dedicated, permanent pathway for human rights defenders, and will resettle up to 250 human rights defenders per year, including their family members, through the Government-Assisted Refugees Program," the department said in a statement.

Canada will work with partners, including the United Nations Refugee Agency, to identify individuals who face security risks and are in need of resettlement.

The 250 additional refugee slots have been reflected in the country's 2020–2022 Immigration Levels Plan, with the allotment beginning this year.

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US, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan Create New Quad Group to Promote Peace - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 16 (Sputnik) - The United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan will create a new quadrilateral diplomatic group to promote the Afghan peace process, stability and trade in the region, the State Department said on Friday.

"Representatives of the United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan agreed in principle to establish a new quadrilateral diplomatic platform focused on enhancing regional connectivity. The parties consider long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan critical to regional connectivity and agree that peace and regional connectivity are mutually reinforcing," the State Department said in a press release.

The parties see the establishment of the group as a means to bolster regional trade, build new transit routes and strengthen business ties, the release said.

The parties have agreed to hold a meeting in the coming months to discuss the details of their future cooperation, which is expected to be based on mutual consensus, the release said.

The security situation in Afghanistan has been deteriorating following the withdrawal most US military forces from the country, as the Taliban (outlawed in Russia) seizes new provinces every day. Since President Joe Biden announced his decision to withdraw from the country, American officials have been engaged in talks with countries neighboring on Afghanistan in search of ways to support the Afghan Defense Forces after the full pullout.